



Merry Christmas

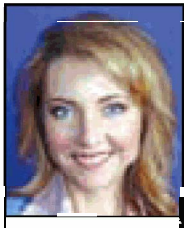
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Something Lost in Translation

Are English-learner Standards Really about the Children?

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SACRAMENTO – California may soon be the first state to implement academic standards for preschool English-language learners. Such a policy could have far-reach-

ing consequences, because, as California goes, so goes the nation.

The standards are part of the state's Preschool Learning Foundations initiative begun in 2004 and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell is expected to approve them in early 2008. Compliance would then be mandatory for any preschool receiving state funds.

Almost two in five California children ages three to five are English-learners. California also educates nearly a third, about 1.6 million, of the country's 5.1 million English-learners. There is certainly a broad consensus surrounding the need for high-quality academic preparation. Who's best qualified to provide such instruction—and how—has been a source of contention for more than decade.

Proponents of universal early education suffered a serious setback in 2006 when California voters defeated Proposition 82, spearheaded by political activist, movie director, and former actor Rob Reiner. Since pre-school gains start fading as early as first grade, voters didn't buy claims that government-run preschool would improve school readiness, prevent high-school dropouts, or lower associated crime rates. Voters were also fed up with the broken promises of bilingual education and in 1998 approved Proposition 227 to prohibit it.

Despite those setbacks, the preschool lobby remains powerful and donning a "standards" mantle helps ease end-runs around the democratic process. For example, Proposition 227's bilingual education

prohibition applies only to K-12 classrooms. The proposed English-language (EL) preschool foundations, however, can be used in English-only or bilingual classrooms. Thus, it appears government-run preschool advocates are joining forces with bilingual education boosters over Nilla Wafers and juice boxes. The sandbox also has room for other organized interest groups.

"It's really about professional development" for teachers the California Department of Education's Gwen Stephens told *Education Week*. Under the new English learner preschool standards, "Teachers aren't going to have to overhaul what they do...but [be] more intentional about the use of play...We don't envision little desks and worksheets."

The fundamental problem in California public education, however, isn't with academic standards per se. It's enforcing them, including the standards for English language learners. The state administers the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to measure the English language proficiency of K-12 students, but local school districts are responsible for reclassifying English learners as fluent.

In many instances students who test "fluent" in English are not being reclassified as such for up to 10 years in some cases. The reason is simple. Schools get more funding for English learners, and research reveals perverse financial incentives as a leading culprit. New pre-school standards will do little to help English learners later on if, for financial reasons, K-12 schools keep fluent students in English-acquisition classes that stunt their growth in academic achievement.

Given current practice, it seems dubious whether "the children" are really the intended beneficiaries of the proposed English learner preschool standards. A

simple, practical step would reveal whether the California Department of Education is truly serious about improving academic outcomes.

The department should require proof that local districts reclassify children as fluent before state and federal governments distribute funding for English acquisition. That would stop local educators from exploiting students for money, enhance children's future, and set a strong accountability example for other states.

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